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ABSTRACT

The changing face of personnel in higher education amidst a competitive marketplace has inspired student affairs administrators to place greater emphasis on hiring practices in an effort to recruit future colleagues from existing resources. To that end, the attempt was made to (1) propose the Empowerment Model as a means by which future student affairs colleagues are cultivated; (2) explore the concepts of authority, responsibility, and power proposed by Bents and Blank (1997), and (3) identify the student affairs cultural climate that supports implementation of the Model. The Empowerment Model represents a dynamic approach to the recruitment and retention of graduate students in student affairs. Readers may view a video representation of the Model at http://www.education.umn.edu/SPS/Empowerment/. (Contains 3 figures and 17 references.) (Author/JDM)

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From Student to Student Affairs Colleague:

Perspectives on Nurturing Untapped Potential In Graduate Assistants

Via the Empowerment Model

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Abstract

The changing face of personnel in higher education amidst a competitive marketplace has inspired student affairs administrators to place greater emphasis on hiring practices in an effort to recruit future colleagues from existing resources. To that end, the attempt is made here to: 1) propose the Empowerment Model as a means by which future student affairs colleagues are cultivated, 2) explore the concepts of authority, responsibility and power proposed by Bents and Blank (1997), and 3) identify the student affairs cultural climate that supports implementation of the model. The Empowerment Model represents a dynamic approach to the recruitment and retention of graduate students in student affairs. Readers may view a video representation of the model at: http://www.education.umn.edu/SPS/Empowerment/.

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From Student to Student Affairs Colleague:

Perspectives on Nurturing Untapped Potential in Graduate Assistants

Via the Empowerment Model

Student affairs is not a profession with high visibility to the young. Many student affairs professionals get their start as graduate students--a financial means to an educational end that eventually gives way to a career. More than two decades have passed since Carpenter (1980) called for the professionalization of student affairs. Current research has increased the visibility of this profession through an emphasis on developing the new student affairs professional (Bloland, 1992; Cooper and Miller, 1998) and creating the climate to do so (Harned and Murphy, 1998).

By its very nature student affairs is a helping profession. Those drawn to it are likely to be individuals who find satisfaction and reward in helping others. The realization that one can accomplish this through the profession seems to inspire a segment of graduate students to become student affairs professionals. Yet, as the global marketplace emerges, there is stiff competition from organizations beyond institutional walls for personnel with these same characteristics. Student affairs is a behind the scenes profession that often must compete against external agencies that promise better salary and benefits, fewer hours, greater recognition and increased opportunities to advance.

How then does the profession of student affairs recruit and retain anyone at all? This article offers, as a partial answer, the Empowerment Model, to enhance the development of graduate students as student affairs professionals. In recent years attention has been paid to the grooming of graduate assistants for future roles in higher education. Some of these studies have focused on graduate assistants as future faculty

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(Held, 2000; Kalish, 2000, Henschen, 1999; Kezer, 1999), as counseling professionals (Bytnar and Ralph, 1994; Morrissey, 2000; Trifari, 1999), or as other "helping" professionals, such as nursing (Allen, 1998). As yet, only a smattering of attention has focused on the development of graduate students as future student affairs professionals (Bloland, 1992; Cooper and Miller, 1998). Harned and Murphy (1998) have examined the idea of creating a nurturing climate for this population; this paper proposes the Empowerment Model as a conceptual framework for achieving this goal.

The Empowerment Model

The focus of the Empowerment Model is the professional development of individual graduate assistants. It is equally important, though, to understand the conceptual framework that supports the model. Based on Bents and Blank' (1997) work on organizational transformation, the conceptual framework outlines the characteristics of the organizational culture and climate in which the Empowerment Model can be successful. The framework combines these characteristics with Bents and Blank' 6-step change process and provides an explanation of the resulting empowerment.

Bents and Blank (1997) discusses authority, responsibility and power as three necessary components of organizational transformation. All individuals in an organization operate within these concepts whether or not they are recognized by the individual or the organization. Authority, responsibility and power are nested as follows: Authority is one's ability or expertise, whatever it may be. Responsibility is the relationship between the ability to do something and the commitment to carry it out. Finally, power is the energy created by two or more individuals who are acting on their authority in responsible ways. It is the product of authority and responsibility. These

elements are ever present in the Empowerment Model. When used in appropriate ways, each individual can make a unique contribution to the power of organizational transformation.

The Empowerment Model is operationalized on Bents and Blank' (1997, p. 68) six-phase change cycle:

Step 1. Awareness

Employee concern: Where do I start?

Essential component: Vision

Step 2. Personal Concerns

Employee concern: What is in it for me?

Essential component: Addressing personal consequences enhances shared vision

Step 3. Management Considerations

Employee concern: What are the guidelines?

Essential component: Explore the context, tradition, history, theory, and current information.

Step 4. Consequence and Commitment

Employee concern: What am I going to do about it?

Essential component: Point of action; public commitments carry even those less dedicated.

Step 5. Collaboration

Employee concern: How can I share this with others?

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Essential component: Flexibility, creativity, and embracing temporary solutions as relationships are developed.

Step 6. Refocusing

Employee concern: How can we best celebrate and move on?

Essential component: Celebration allows for reflection, evaluation, refocusing and redirection. Without it, the change cycle is diminished and the process is inadequately prepared to be recycled.

In the Empowerment Model, this cycle is repeated again and again, with each new project, responsibility, or environmental change. Ultimately the model becomes the standardized response by all actors in the organization—it becomes the cultural approach to addressing problem solving.

Finally, understanding empowerment is the capstone of the conceptual framework. The Empowerment Model relies on a shared understanding that every person is empowered; that is, that every person has authority and responsibility, and acts upon them in a responsible manner within a 6-phase cycle of organizational change. Bents and Blank (1997, p. 70) defines empowerment as "individuals acting with their full authority in a responsible manner to create synergistic transformational power." Individual empowerment leads to inspired performance and feeds organizational transformation by harnessing the capacity to empower one's self and others to realize a common vision.

The Empowerment Model relies on several underlying assumptions that may seem obvious, but are often challenging to maintain in any organizational setting. First, it assumes that change is a natural and inevitable event, within both the institution of higher education and the profession of student affairs. With regard to authority, responsibility

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and power, it is assumed that everyone possesses authority and that all acknowledges it. Authority cannot be given, or taken away, except by an individual's choice to relinquish it or ignore its existence. Furthermore, it is a universal expectation for all to act on whatever authority they possess. Trust and individual accountability are essential organizational assumptions. It must first be assumed that people have good and trustworthy intentions to make meaningful and purposeful contributions, which then requires all members to accept and embrace responsibility while making contributions appropriate to their ability. Finally, it is assumed that the organization is able to sustain a climate characterized by civility, adherence to ethics, and values appropriate to the service mission of a student-centered operation.

The Empowerment Model depicts a system of three core components of professional activity and development for a graduate assistant, within an organizational culture of empowerment. The model's core components are: 1) *Training and Feedback*, 2) *Competence and Confidence*, and 3) *Growth and Trust*.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The Empowerment Model is not linear or static. Readers may view a video representation at www.education.umn.edu/SPS/Empowerment/. Each component is a developmental cycle that feeds upon itself, at differing rates of speed and in unique timeframes depending upon the individual. In the beginning, all three components typically exist as separate entities within the organizational culture of empowerment. A new graduate assistant first experiences empowerment as an external force of the organizational environment, as s/he encounters the first stages of change. Simultaneous

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with the stages of change, the new assistant is likely learning in all three areas of the model independently, with seemingly no intersection between any two.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

As the student becomes socialized into the empowerment environment, and understands and grasps the philosophies of authority, responsibility, and power, the components gain attractive force and begin to converge. It is at this point that the graduate assistant is likely to experience bursts of empowerment from within.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Once employees move beyond Steps 1 and 2, where the focus is concern for the individual, the graduate assistant begins to clarify issues of authority, responsibility, and power. They re-examine values in the shared vision, refine skills for the future, and align themselves with the direction and mission of the organization, as they strengthen the bonds uniting person, task and organization. Sustained empowerment occurs at the union of all three circles. As the circles converge, graduate assistants recognize and internalize the principles of authority, responsibility and power, which ultimately become the fuel that energizes all professional activity and perpetuates the empowerment culture.

The Empowerment Model offers not only a means to increase individual productivity, but also presents a pathway to create and maintain an environment that successfully negotiates the ambiguity of day-to-day work in student affairs. While this article focuses on the experience of graduate assistants, the Empowerment Model cannot be conducted in a vacuum—all employees will experience it. The Empowerment Model generates a socialization process that may increase the retention of graduate assistants as student affairs professionals.

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Within a student affairs setting, a graduate assistant undergoes a developmental process through the Empowerment Model. The presence of several cultural components will ensure that the graduate assistant has the opportunity to flourish, including: 1) hiring and training, 2) mentoring, 3) retention, and 4) transition and transformation. These components require deliberate and systematic attention in order for the student affairs setting to achieve the desired effects of the Empowerment Model. The delivery of these components is paramount to the ultimate success of the assistant's professional development and empowerment.

Hiring & Training

The conditions surrounding the hiring of graduate assistants set the stage for their professional development within a student affairs operation. A thoughtful hiring process will lead to the selection of ambitious graduate assistants who are appropriate matches for the particular student affairs setting. A successful hiring process begins with effective recruitment. Typically recruiting for student affairs graduate assistants should take place in academic departments that breed interest in the profession. Programs in educational policy and administration, and counseling and student personnel psychology typically offer students who are looking for hands-on experience in their field. By identifying students with interests related to the responsibilities of the position, a search committee can improve the chances of hiring graduate assistants who will be invested in the position.

Setting expectations early is an essential aspect of the hiring process. Through the job description and the interview process, the search committee conveys the responsibility and importance of the position. Therefore, the job description should

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accurately reflect the multifaceted nature of the position within the office so that the potential graduate assistant is both prepared for and excited about commitment to the job.

The interview itself should convey professionalism. Graduate assistants, like all new hires, deserve a formal interview. Within an interview, the search committee can clarify the position to the candidate. The interview gives the committee a chance to sell the job as an opportunity. It is important to convey to the applicant that while this position may cover tuition, provide a regular salary, or offer other financial benefits, it is also an opportunity for growth and professional development.

Not all candidates will fit the mold of the Empowerment Model. For this reason, attention to the selection process is crucial. Potential graduate assistants should be cognizant of their own power and excited about the position. It is important that the search committee looks for a good fit. Each student affairs setting comes with its own culture; finding a good fit for this culture maximizes the potential for empowerment within the organization.

Finally, student status should be considered when selecting a graduate assistant. Often students who are in the early stages of their graduate studies will be more willing to invest in the job and more inclined to become acculturated to the student affairs environment. Knowing that a candidate has the potential for longevity, a search committee can feel confident that in hiring this student they are making a sound investment in the future of the student affairs operation.

Once selected and hired, the graduate assistant undergoes training. Training can be viewed in the traditional sense, where the new hire receives instruction on job responsibilities, and experiences a period of acclimation to the work setting. Both the

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initial and ongoing training serve as processes of empowerment. Initial training will lead to initial feedback. This cycle of training and feedback will foster in the graduate assistant a sense of authority, and an understanding of the level of responsibility expected in the position.

As the graduate assistant continues to be trained and acculturated to the profession and the work setting, it is expected that gradually competence in job duties will increase. With this competence, and a growing level of comfort at work, the assistant experiences confidence. Thus competence leads to confidence and confidence leads to more competence. As the graduate assistant comes to find a place in the office, trust in coworkers, self, and surroundings begins to rise. As trust levels rise, the graduate assistant begins to grow. In this sense, growth is dependent upon trust and additional trust can only develop with continued opportunities for growth. Just as training requires feedback, and competence requires confidence, so too does growth require trust.

Ongoing training involves the meshing of these three cycles. *Training and Feedback*, *Competence and Confidence*, and *Growth and Trust* come together with increased responsibility. The result of this synergy is empowerment. The combination of these developmental cycles lead graduate assistants to expertise in the field. With effective training techniques, they begin to take initiative and feel like a valued part of the organization.

Mentoring

Mentoring is one of the necessary components to the training process of a graduate assistant. Cooper & Miller (1998) interpret the word mentor in various ways. They use terms such as teacher, guide, friend, and guru to capture the many facets of a

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mentor. In examining these various helping roles, it is evident that mentoring relationships provide a number of benefits to the student, the mentor, and the organization.

The Empowerment Model views the graduate assistant as the mentee, or the recipient of the mentoring. Benefits to the graduate assistant include support, instruction, and a comfortable connection with a mature professional role model, all of which support the developmental cycle of building confidence, competence, and satisfaction. A mentor supports the graduate assistant on this evolutionary journey. Furthermore, by working closely to develop the skills of a graduate assistant in a student affairs setting, mentors are not only investing in the future of their organization, but also are creating a culture of growth and shared power. The shared knowledge, commitment and increased level of skill brought on by mentoring relationships greatly strengthen the culture of any organization, in particular highly collaborative student affairs operations.

In a sense, positive mentoring is the backbone of the Empowerment Model. Good mentoring is essential to allow for each of the loops of the model to maintain their continuous motion. The cycles of *Training and Feedback*, *Confidence and Competence*, and *Growth and Trust* will only come together in an environment that contains successful and committed mentors. The role of a mentor in the Empowerment Model is to demonstrate, foster, and perpetuate the principles of authority, responsibility and power.

Mentoring can be structured, as formal or informal, but should be based on the unique characteristics of the particular student affairs operation. While positive outcomes may result from either condition, informal mentoring tends to be more compatible to the hectic nature of student affairs. The student affairs operation from which this model was

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proposed is based on an informal mentoring structure. Informal implies that mentoring pairings occur naturally due to various circumstances. A mentor may be a supervisor, or a supervisor's supervisor, or a mentor may be another role model in the office who connects with a graduate assistant personally or academically, or as a result of shared work responsibilities. It is important to recognize the line between the role of supervisor and that of mentor. More often than not, these roles will overlap. A good mentor must maintain the professional duties entailed in supervision, but simultaneously be able to implement the ingredients necessary to nurture the untapped potential in graduate assistants.

Regular meetings, trust, feedback, relationship building, and networking are the essential ingredients to nurturing this potential. Regular meetings can be scheduled or unscheduled, weekly or daily. It is crucial that meeting times are a good fit for both the mentor and the graduate assistant. Meetings may include a "check-in", on both a personal and a professional level, and provide a time for graduate assistants to ask questions and to get answers. The open-door policy is a critical feature of positive mentoring. A graduate assistant will know that he or she is valued and respected as a professional when a mentor demonstrates consistent availability.

Above all, having trust in graduate assistants is imperative. A mentor demonstrates trust by granting responsibility and allowing assistants to feel ownership of the work they do. Increased trust leads to increased growth and the more graduate assistants grow the more trust the mentor will gain – and this cycle will continue.

With increased levels of responsibility, graduate assistants will desire some form of feedback. Positive mentoring entails staying involved, listening to ideas, and

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providing ample input. Presenting challenge and encouraging creative thinking aids in the growth of graduate assistants and reminds them that their work is valued. Important to note is that mentors must maintain the balance between giving quick and easy answers versus encouraging graduate assistants to search for their own solutions. Mentoring relationships should foster independence, rather than dependence.

Finally, it is imperative that the student affairs team view graduate assistants as colleagues, not just as student workers. Mentors should encourage graduate assistants to make professional connections with others, including coworkers, faculty members, and administrators. Additionally, personal connections between mentors and mentees will lead to increased levels of satisfaction and commitment.[1] Professional and personal connections will help graduate assistants to build networks and open channels of communication to establish themselves as emergent student affairs professionals. Mentors can also encourage graduate assistants to join professional organizations and to attend conferences, which will play a key role in their transition to student affairs professionals.

Retention

There are several critical factors that are characteristic of a formal retention procedure within the Empowerment Model. First and foremost, the organization should be committed to hiring the individual who demonstrates the greatest likelihood of embracing the collaborative essence of the model. A primary organizational concern in retaining graduate assistants is evaluating the fit between the organizational culture and the professional qualities of the applicants in the pool. The organization must evaluate

[1] Of course it is always important to recognize boundaries with graduate assistants. While a personal element to a relationship will enhance the work experience, maintaining professionalism is always a must.

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the fit between its own culture and the applicants' professional qualities. The hiring committee should formulate interview questions to probe for attributes that feed the three cycles of the Empowerment Model, (*Training and Feedback*; *Confidence and Competence*, and *Growth and Trust*.) e.g., ability to be self-starting, commitment to professionalism, openness to multiple perspectives, and willingness to empower both themselves and others. Responses to these questions should clearly demonstrate to the committee how the applicants are likely perceive and act upon the three components of the Empowerment Model.

Second, graduate assistants should experience a genuine hiring process which will allow them the opportunity to deeply reflect upon their professional experiences and align this opportunity with their career goals. As discussed previously, the organization has already invested much in supporting and grooming graduate assistants as future professionals. While the interview process should provide all applicants with the opportunity to engage in a deep reflection on their professional goals, graduate assistants are more likely to contemplate this opportunity in light of the culture in which they have been groomed. Lastly, the process should serve as a ritualistic marking that punctuates the transition from graduate assistant to student affairs professional.

Transition and Transformation

Once hired, the collective focus should shift from retention to the transition and transformation of a new professional colleague. Just as the continuous loop of the Empowerment Model sustains the development of graduate assistants new to the profession, it will also sustain the continued development of new student affairs professionals. Of course, common sense dictates that professional development is an on-

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going process and one does not transform into the consummate student affairs professional quite as quickly as one can transition from student to colleague. However, it is prudent to issue a cautionary statement to administrators and supervisors that familiarity with the staff, the work of the office, and the institution should not be misconstrued as full-fledged professional readiness. The graduate assistant-cum-professional still requires a period of transition and transformation. Transformation requires the complete integration of the core components of empowerment (authority, power, and responsibility). Again, as with the development of the graduate assistant, the process of transformation for new professionals is not linear. Rather, the three developmental cycles that drive the Empowerment Model (*Training and Feedback*, *Confidence and Competence*, and *Growth and Trust*) will simultaneously and continuously operate throughout the life cycle of all employees.

It is important to consider several issues imperative to the successful transition and subsequent transformation into a professional position in student affairs, including the scope and rhythm of a full appointment, networking, ongoing mentoring, and the importance of celebration, review of accomplishments, and goal-setting. Administrators, supervisors, mentors, and other professionals in the student affairs operation should be attuned to these issues in order to provide on-going support to their newest colleague, while maximizing the full benefit to the unit of the synergistic effects of the Empowerment Model. More seasoned professionals should always remember that they can, directly and indirectly, contribute to the advancement of student affairs as a professional field by supporting the transformation of new student affairs professionals.

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The most obvious change that the new student affairs professional faces upon the transition is the change in scope and rhythm of a full professional appointment. As a new professional, the former graduate assistant now must successfully adjust to the demands of a full-time position, often while continuing to balance academic pursuits, family obligations, and personal needs. Mastering time management is essential to the successful transition into a busy student affairs operation. In addition to job-related training, new professionals can ease their transition by utilizing various campus resources, e.g., new employee orientations, professional development opportunities, benefits seminars, counseling services, etc.

Networking with other professionals on campus facilitates professional growth and further promotes professional competency. To enhance the building of a professional network, new professionals should also be encouraged to serve on an appropriate collegiate committee. Furthermore, more tangible forms of support, such as the allocation of professional development funds, can establish and strengthen connections to the professional community. New professionals should be encouraged to join professional organizations, attend and/or present at professional conferences, and participate in skill-building workshops (e.g., technology, supervisory, diversity training, etc.). Access to such funds may serve to boost the morale of the new student affairs professional and promote a sense of ownership for professional development.

Mentoring remains central to the transition and transformation of the new professional. Expanded responsibilities may foster in the new professional feelings of increasing ambiguity and anxiety, and lesser degrees of empowerment. These, of course, are typical responses to change. The Empowerment Model is designed to absorb

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professional transitions, and to renew and increase feelings of empowerment throughout a career. Mentors can help feed the model's core developmental cycles (of *Training and Feedback*, *Confidence and Competence*, and *Growth and Trust*) by helping new student affairs colleagues to: obtain an accurate understanding of new roles, responsibilities, and expectations; identify specific skills necessary to be successful in the new position; and identify future career interests and goals. Transformation is further aided by regular interaction with supervisors, collegial interaction and informal one-on-one communication, and active involvement with program management in a team setting.

As discussed previously, celebration is a very important component of the change process underlying the Empowerment Model. Celebration is perhaps of particular importance to the professional development of the new student affairs colleague. Established colleagues must make a concerted effort to recognize the accomplishments of the new professional that indicate successful transformation. Through frequent private and public recognition of deeds, and informal group celebrations, the community feeds the Empowerment Model's cycle of *Confidence and Competence*. Finally, celebration serves as a physical marker of the accomplishment and development of the new student affairs professional. Further, through an annual review of accomplishments, the new student affairs professional is encouraged to reflect upon past experiences and efforts, evaluate the long-term effects of professional development activities, and set new goals, both professional and personal, consistent with both the organizational mission and the career path of the individual. The term "accomplishment" is preferred to "performance review" to emphasize the "empowering" nature of the professional development, and the supporting role the office plays in this on-going process.

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Summary and Conclusion

The Empowerment Model represents a dynamic approach to the development of new student affairs professionals. It has been suggested that attention to detail in four areas is essential: 1) hiring and training, 2) mentoring, 3) retention, and 4) transition and transformation. With the refined delivery of these components, implementation of the Empowerment Model may prove successful in retaining graduate assistants as student affairs professionals. The model reminds student affairs administrators that empowerment of graduate assistants relies on a dynamic system of *Training and Feedback*, *Competence and Confidence*, and *Growth and Trust*. These continuously revolving cycles will coalesce to create empowerment when the four cultural components are successfully in place. Retention of a skilled, committed and empowered graduate assistant is the primary result. The model's use can generate significant benefits to the students, the student affairs operation, the academic institution, and the profession of student affairs as a whole.

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Footnotes

[1] Of course it is always important to recognize boundaries with graduate assistants. While a personal element to a relationship will enhance the work experience, maintaining professionalism is always a must.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. The core components of the Empowerment Model.

Figure 2. The first stages of change for the graduate assistant.

Figure 3. Sustained empowerment.

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Figure 1.

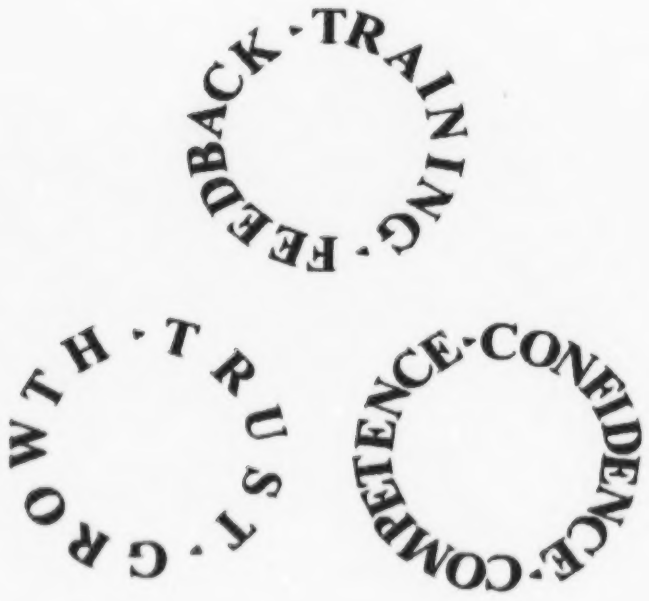

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Figure 2.

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Figure 3.

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